



profile

by JESSE BRINK

Church of Our Saviour Children's Chapel



SITTING FOR A MOMENT OF QUIET CONTEMPLATION In this new chapel in San Gabriel, I couldn't help but feel that seventeen centuries of Christian architecture had gotten it wrong. Doesn't a basilica—essentially an urban form, enclosed and enlivened solely by inert statuary and the slow progress of the sun across stained glass—deny God's creation, substituting the pallid facsimiles of man? Open and largely unadorned,

this small chapel on the campus of the Church of Our Saviour, in San Gabriel, lets that creation in, and fosters the wonder it excites.

Of course, this is a children's chapel, so quiet contemplation is not necessarily so easily achieved. Yet architect John Dale's design, augmented by the artistic additions of collaborator Susan Narduli, focuses natural inattention and curiosity to enhance the spiritual message. They do so not through creating an absolutely stark space "without distractions" but rather by including key elements that catch the wandering eye and hold it. For example, the lamps that Narduli designed, in collaboration with fabricator Paul Butler, are fanciful and encourage the sort of close attention that actually can lead to reflection. Dale also offers surprise discoveries as well, such as a child-high shelf along the north wall that is topped with flora- and fauna-rich fossil stone.

Meanwhile, the glazed walls surround the celebrants with the splendor of nature, always visible through glass, and almost tangible when the walls are completely folded aside. Openness feels like the chapel's natural state. Even overhead, the high slate roof is pierced with skylights that expose the movements of the clouds and leafy trees that hover above. In addition, a clerestory window, glazed with dichroic glass, refracts the sun to bathe the cross with golden light during the winter season. To echo this effect, the team hopes to plant a row of ginkgo trees along the eastern edge of the property, the leaves of which also turn golden in December.

Those future ginkoes would replace the aging hundred-year-old pepper trees that still mark the church's original drive. The site retains much of its venerable history, including parts of the church, where the adults gather, that



date from 1870. Indeed, the church looks as though it were delivered directly from the nineteenth-century English countryside. The new chapel, and an accompanying parish hall, mark the first phase of a two-part master plan. They replace a small 1950s classroom building and a chapel that mimicked the main church on a smaller scale, linked to the parish house by patios and a covered walk.

Dale worked to simplify and unify the interior and exterior spaces. Thus all circulation occurs outside the new buildings, which themselves are almost like open pavilions, with multiple entry points. The chapel sits on a quartzite patio that joins it to the rest of the complex and actually continues into the building to become the floor. This transparency between inside and out is maintained and exposed by the glazed walls. The steep slate roof provides the building its sense of mass

and gravity. All the forms are traditional, but the detailing sharp and contemporary. Dale avoided fussiness to “make it clear that this is not a sentimental addition.” The editing necessary to achieve this effect went so far as to exclude rain gutters, relying instead on deep overhangs and French drains.

Artist Narduli took this prosaic detail and developed it to meet a somber programmatic need for the chapel to serve as a memorial for young congregants who have passed away. Inspired by a folkloric tradition of burying children along the walls of a church, with the belief that rain running from a church’s roof was blessed, she subtly engraved their names in the glass, to be washed by the water that splashes from the stones that edge the walls. This, like all the chapel’s elements, large and small, reflects an architecture that encourages wonder, then steps out of wonder’s way. ■

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